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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal qualitative study examined the variety and scope of literacy experiences in the homes of families from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Original participants were 41 children enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs during the 1992-93 school year and their families from public elementary schools serving Baltimore City neighborhoods consisting of various combinations of low- and middle-income African American and European American families. Two of the components of the longitudinal study focused on an ecological inventory of socialization resources and activities, and an assessment of individual children's emergent literacy competencies in a variety of theoretically important domains. Qualitative analyses of diaries completed by parents indicated that literacy is (1) a source of entertainment; (2) a set of skills to be deliberately cultivated; and (3) an integral ingredient of everyday life. Assessments conducted during the spring of both their pre-kindergarten and kindergarten years indicated significant growth on almost all measures, and children performed better on tasks that were more sensitive to their home experiences. Analyses will be extended through the children's first few years of formal literacy instruction. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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Children's Emergent Literacy Experiences in the Sociocultural Contexts of Home and School

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It is widely recognized that the home environment exerts a powerful influence on early reading (Sonnenschein,Brody, & Munsterman, in press; Sulzby & Teale, 1991) and that documentation of the home experiences of young children is an important prerequisite to building connections between home and school, especially among socioculturally diverse populations (Baker et al., in press; Fitzgerald & Goncu, 1993; Thompson, Mixon, & Serpell, in press). Over the past several years, we have been engaged in a longitudinal study sponsored by the NRRC designed to provide rich qualitative descriptions of the variety and scope of literacy experiences in the homes of families from diverse sociocultural backgrounds and to examine in detail many of the psychological variables that serve as formative influences on reading development.

Our investigation is founded on a theoretical framework that emphasizes the social and cultural contexts of development. In accordance with Bronfenbrenner (1979), we believe human development occurs in a context of overlapping and interdependent systems of social and cultural organization. The Super and Harkness (1986) concept of the eco-cultural niche has also guided our thinking. In this view, each child develops within an eco-cultural niche structured by physical and social settings, customs of child rearing, and implicit psychological theories of caregivers (see Serpell, 1993). We further assume that development of competence in literacy typically occurs through a form of apprenticeship (Rogoff, 1990). This apprenticeship begins early in children's lives as they are exposed to cultural practices that provide opportunities for learning about reading and writing (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Our research design includes four key components: (1) an ecological inventory of socialization resources and activities, based on observations, diaries, and interviews in both the home and the school; (2) an account of socialization ethnotheories, based on structured interviews about beliefs, values, and practices of the parents and teachers responsible for structuring those environments; (3) an account of coconstructive processes through which children acquire the cultural resources of literacy, based on observations and video-recordings of the child's interaction with siblings and adult caregivers at home and with peers and teachers at school; and (4) assessment of individual children's emergent literacy compe-

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tencies in a variety of theoretically important domains, with some tasks individually tailored to the child's own home experiences.

In this article, we describe some findings from two of these components, the ecological inventory and the assessments of emergent literacy, based on data collected in the first years of the project. Original participants in the study consisted of 41 children enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs during the 1992–1993 school year and their families. Participants were recruited from public elementary schools serving Baltimore City neighborhoods with four contrasting types of demographic profiles; populated mainly by (1) low-income African American families, (2) low-income European American families, (3) a mix of low-income African American and European American families and (4) a mix of middle-income African American and European American families.

In the first formal report of the project, we described the everyday home experiences of the children when they were in pre-kindergarten (Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, & Scher, 1994; Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, in press). Parents' spontaneous reports of children's everyday activities were first collected by having parents keep a one-week diary. In an interview conducted after the diary was collected and studied, parents were questioned about children's participation in specific activities that have the potential to foster literacy development. The interview explored children's participation in specific activities in the following areas: (1) game and play activities (e.g., pretend play, educational toys); (2) meal-time activities (e.g., food preparation, conversation); (3) television, video, and music activities (e.g., watching cartoons, listening to the radio); (4) recurrent outings (e.g., shopping, library); and (5) reading, writing, and drawing activities (e.g., storybook reading, writing). Parents were asked to indicate the frequency of their child's participation in each activity on a 4-point rating scale ranging from not at all to very often (almost every day).

Families in all sociocultural groups reported in the ecological inventories that their children had frequent opportunities to engage in activities that potentially would foster development in several domains conducive to literacy: orientation toward print (e.g., storybook reading), phonological awareness (e.g. singing); knowledge of the world (e.g., television viewing); and narrative competence (e.g., mealtime conversation).

The diaries served as a rich source of information about children's experiences as well as parental interpretations of those experiences. The following excerpt is a small portion of a day's diary entry written by a low-income European American mother:

...She start by saying her ABC twice. then she asked her father for a quarter to buy wrestling cards she asked her sister to take her to the store to get them Her sister and brother take her to the store at 1:20. She comes back and said its too windy it will blow me away. I tell her no it won't it never blowed me away when I was little like you. she said mom you were never little like me your my mom so how can you be little like me. then she starts counting on the calender. then she play with her ABC maginets on the regirator singing ABC's she keep on asking when she goes to school she said Do I go to school tomorrow or the next day I tell her the next day she said I bother get my clothes ready I tell her wait until tomorrow and you can get them ready for the next day she said OK I will she sing Hot Cross buns she plays mario with her brother listen to radio 92Q with her sister and try to sing along. I call her father to help me with Angle in the Ged book and she comes in to show us her right Ankel and left we told her we're talking about Angle not Ankel they may sound alike but difference.

These spontaneous descriptions converge with the more quantitative indices of the ecological inventory to reveal that the child had ample opportunities for learning about print (playing with ABC magnets, counting on the calendar), developing phonological awareness (singing songs, discussing with her mother the similarity of sounds in the words angle and ankle), acquiring knowledge of the world (going to the store); and developing narrative competence (conversing with her mother about various events, including those that occurred when her mother was not present).

Qualitative analyses of all the diaries revealed three important cultural themes regarding literacy: literacy is a source of entertainment; literacy is a set of skills to be deliberately cultivated; and literacy is an integral ingredient of everyday life. Middle-income families tended to show greater endorsement of literacy as a source of entertainment. Lower income families, in contrast, tended to give more attention to literacy as a skill to be deliberately cultivated.

A second report focuses on children's emergent literacy competencies and the relation to these cultural themes (Sonnenschein, et al., forthcoming). The competency measures that were used reflect three of the dimensions of early experience associated with literacy development explored in the ecological inventory: orientation toward print, phonological awareness, and narrative competence. Some of the tasks were fairly standard reading readiness measures, such as letter naming, while others were tailored to individual children's home experiences, such as identifying names of products used in their homes.

The children were assessed at their schools during the spring of both their pre-kindergarten and kindergarten years. Not surprisingly,

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there was significant growth on almost all measures over this period. Nevertheless, all of the children already had a strong foundation of knowledge in pre-kindergarten. In general, they performed better on tasks that were more sensitive to their home experiences, such as recognition of logos of products used at home. In addition, even when they gave responses that were not technically correct, the responses usually made sense. For example, although children may not have been able to identify a television guide as such, they often identified it by the appropriate generic label, magazine.

A second series of analyses explored the relation between home practices and experiences and early literacy development. We asked whether a child growing up in a home that is predominantly oriented toward the view that literacy is a source of entertainment is more or less likely to develop an orientation toward print, phonological awareness, or narrative competence than a child growing up in a home where literacy is more typically viewed as a set of skills to be acquired. The entertainment perspective was a better predictor of print-oriented competencies than the skills perspective for children in both middle-income and lower-income families, though results were mixed for the other two domains.

In summary, we have acquired from caregivers much information about the diverse opportunities for attaining literacy available to preschool children from various sociocultural backgrounds, and we have learned that particular socialization emphases may be more conducive to early literacy development than others. The longitudinal nature of the project will permit us to extend our analyses through the children's first few years of formal literacy instruction. In current work with pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers, also sponsored by the NRRC, we are sharing the knowledge and insights we have acquired to date as a resource for parents and teachers cooperating to further children's literacy development.

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